

Neoliberalism Across Borders:

A Comparative Case Study of Community Colleges' Capacity to Serve Student-Parents

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges in the US and Canada operate within postsecondary environments that are being reshaped by neoliberal policymaking. As community colleges in both countries respond to the pressures of neoliberalism, their capacity to serve students already marginalized by their “nontraditional” status may be affected in contradictory ways, benefitting some students while further disadvantaging others. This article draws on data from a comparative case study of two urban community colleges, one in the United States and the other in Canada, in order to explore how the increasing marketization of postsecondary education in both countries is affecting each college’s position within its particular postsecondary environment, and, in turn, is shaping its capacity at the organizational level to support its student population. As a means of highlighting the consequences of neoliberal processes on marginalized students, we focus our attention at the organizational level on resources and supports targeted at students with dependent children, a group of students that is often rendered invisible—both by neoliberal discourses as well as traditional postsecondary policies and practices.

Keywords

Community Colleges, Neoliberalism, Nontraditional College Students, Student-Parents

Community colleges across the United States and Canada offer postsecondary access and career opportunities to students who might not otherwise attend college. Their students form a highly diverse population, in terms of academic preparation, range of educational and career goals, and the complexity of their lives. For instance, community college students are more likely than those who begin at universities to face competing responsibilities from work and family. In both countries, students with dependent children are more likely to attend a community college than a four-year college or university (Choy, 2002; van Rhijn, Quosai, & Lero, 2011). At the same time, students with work and family obligations describe a range of challenges associated with their efforts to persist in college (Matus-Goodman & Grossman, 2002). The experiences of such students illuminate an essential dilemma inherent to providing postsecondary opportunity to a diverse student population in both countries: Postsecondary policies and practices position the typical community college student—indeed, the collective majority of postsecondary students—as “nontraditional” (Deil-Amen, 2015). As the primary point of postsecondary access for this marginalized majority, the community college represents a crucial site for exploring organization-level responses to diverse nontraditional student populations, including the subset of community college students with dependent children.

Definitions of nontraditional postsecondary students include the categorizations of minimally, moderately or highly nontraditional, based on the number of nontraditional characteristics ascribed to the student (Choy, 2002). Nontraditional characteristics can include any factor that differentiates a student from the archetypal 18-year old who enrolls in college immediately after high school graduation, resides on campus, attends full-time, works no more than part-time, is considered a dependent for financial aid purposes, and has no dependents.

Given that the number of *highly* nontraditional students (those with more than three nontraditional characteristics) in the US exceeds that of the traditional undergraduate population (Choy, 2002), the continued normalizing of the “traditional” student focuses attention on the deficiencies of nontraditional students, rather than on the capacity of postsecondary institutions to support a diverse student body (Deil-Amen, 2015). Levin (2007) notes that these classification schemes render some community college students outside the typical parameters of even the “highly nontraditional” student. Such “beyond the margins” students (p. 30) include welfare recipients, the working poor, and adult immigrants.

Levin’s (2007) categorization of students who are beyond the margins introduces an important experiential aspect to the measurement of nontraditionality. While a greater number of nontraditional characteristics may complicate a college student’s experience of disadvantage, the crux of the issue revolves around the extent to which aspects of the student’s experience are visible to administrators and faculty within the college, and in turn, how the college is organized to accommodate the student. Student-parents represent an analytically interesting subset of nontraditional students, in that such students may fit into the conventional categorization scheme, anywhere from minimally to highly traditional. They may also possess characteristics that locate them “beyond the margins.” Our focus on how colleges are organized to respond to the needs of student-parents therefore addresses this important question: to what extent is this particular group of nontraditional students visible and accommodated by the college’s policies and resources?

Community colleges’ ability to fulfill the promise of increased postsecondary opportunity for nontraditional students is complicated by their location within systems that are being reshaped by the tenets of neoliberalism (Levin, 2007). The term neoliberalism refers to the political-economic restructuring pursued across capitalist democracies over the past half-century.

Neoliberal policymaking is aimed at decreasing the political, legal, and social limits on market processes, corporate growth, and capital accumulation (Harvey, 2007a). It weds an economic theory—a market free from state intervention—with a political commitment to individual, entrepreneurial freedom and the protection of private property. Theoretically, the goal of eliminating restraints on economic activity contradicts the political need for strong state protection of individuals and property. Consequently, neoliberalism does not comprise a coherent set of economic and political policies, but rather emerges in variable and uneven ways while accompanied by fervent ideological commitment to the idea of the market (Ball, 2012).

In terms of the state's role in supporting public postsecondary education, one of the most visible signs of neoliberal principles—increased market competition, new forms of state intervention, and promotion of individual rights over collective responsibility—involves postsecondary funding patterns. Basic trends over the past four decades include persistent decreases in unrestricted, public funding sources, decreased need-based financial aid for students, and increased competition for resources at every level of education (Callan, 2001; St. John, 2003). These funding patterns compose a key empirical indicator of system-wide policy changes, illuminating the extent to which the system has become “marketized” (Dobbins, Knill, & Vögtle, 2011, p. 667) as well as the state's role in enabling the neoliberalizing process (Ball, 2012). Colleges and universities have responded to shifts in government funding by seeking alternate forms of funding, working towards greater efficiencies, and thereby “learning lessons from the methods and values of the private sector” through what Ball terms the “curriculum” of neoliberal reform (Ball, 2012, p. 30).

Researchers across the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia have explored the implications of neoliberalism for research universities (Leslie, Slaughter, Taylor, & Zhang, 2012; Marginson

& Considine, 2000; Pusser, Gansneder, Gallaway, & Pope, 2005; Shore, 2008) and its effects on students at four-year colleges and universities (Goodnight, Hingstman, & Green, 2015; Mitchell, 2003). Far fewer scholars have explored the effects of neoliberalism on the operations of community colleges (Mars & Metcalfe, 2009) or the implications for how community colleges serve students, particularly students considered nontraditional (for one notable exception, see Levin, 2007).

Similarly, there have been few studies that explore the impact of national policies on institutions' capacities to serve student-parents. For example, Moreau (2016) describes three distinct approaches to supporting student-parents across 10 English universities (careblind, targeted, and mainstreaming), identifying the potential disadvantages of each approach. Although Moreau acknowledges the external policy context in shaping these approaches, the primary focus is on the organizational level (see also Moreau and Kerner, 2012, 2015). In a notable exception, Brooks's (2012) comparative study of students at universities in the UK and in Denmark underscores the influence of state ideologies on organizational culture and students' experiences. Specifically, Brooks suggests that organization-level differences in the availability of childcare, parental leave, and flexible modes of study resulted from the contrasting political contexts within which the universities operate.

Extending Brooks's (2012) multi-level analytical approach, we focus on the ways in which neoliberal processes materialize across multiple contexts and shape community colleges' capacities to attend to the needs of student-parents. As community colleges respond to the constraints and pressures of neoliberal policymaking, their capacity to serve diverse student populations may be affected in contradictory ways. These contradictions emerge, in part, from the "polymorphic and evolving" processes composing neoliberalism (Ball, 2012, p. 30). As Ball

explains, neoliberalism takes on “local characteristics from the geographies of existing political economic circumstances and institutional frameworks” (p. 30). These particular, local contexts frame the ways that neoliberal practices materialize, suggesting the need to explore local educational practices and postsecondary organizing within a framework that attends to what Brenner and Theodore (2002) describe as “the contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects” (p. 349). Like Ball, these authors point out the need to understand the contexts of neoliberal reform as occurring at multiple scales (national, regional, and local).

Accordingly, in this article, we investigate how neoliberalism emerges in organizational practices at two community colleges while recognizing the differences in how each college is situated within its particular set of local, regional, and national regulatory and policy contexts. Our analysis illuminates how the neoliberal curriculum of reform affects approaches to serving nontraditional students and student-parents in particular. Not only does neoliberal ideology discount the effect of structural inequality on nontraditional students’ postsecondary pathways, but it also renders family relationships and caregiving responsibilities irrelevant to its emphasis on individual responsibility and market-based exchanges.

We begin by introducing our conceptual framework for comparing the policy contexts across our two sites of study. We then describe our sites, Canadian College (CC) and American Community College (ACC), and our methodological approach to this comparative case study. We then proceed to our findings, outlining how postsecondary governance and funding policies construct differing conditions for each college as it responds to various neoliberal pressures. In turn, these different contexts maintain significant implications for each college’s capacity to attend to students with children.

Conceptual Framework

The continuing influence of neoliberalism in restructuring public sector organizations serves as the overarching conceptual framework for this comparative analysis. To accomplish our cross-country comparison of how neoliberalism emerges in specific, local postsecondary contexts, we have adapted Dobbins, Knill and Vögtle's (2011) classification, which offers a means of describing current marketization trends across postsecondary systems with different governance and policymaking histories. This framework provides the analytical foundation for understanding how each community college navigates neoliberal pressures and the resulting implications for each college's capacity to support student-parents.

In both the US and Canada, higher education is positioned—through neoliberal funding priorities and policy discourses—primarily as an engine of state or provincial economic development, with community colleges playing a crucial role in supporting regional economies. This, in turn, positions students as consumers of a private good and as future workers with marketable skills (Labaree, 1997), rendering their roles as democratic citizens or family members less relevant. The most obvious expression of neoliberal policymaking across the postsecondary sectors in the US and Canada consists of the continued shift in allocations of public funds; state or provincial appropriations cover a decreasing percentage of operating costs and an increasing proportion of operating costs are covered by tuition revenue.

These trends compose an integral part of a larger political economic project that has both reduced and reshaped state responsibility for the economic and social welfare of its citizenry (Harvey, 2007b; Levin, 2005). As Harvey (2007b) notes, this redistributive project includes such mechanisms as the “displacement of state expenditures and free access to all by user fees” (p. 38). The result is an unprecedented market orientation across the public sphere, accompanied by a discourse that emphasizes individual responsibility.

In the case of postsecondary education across both countries, a neoliberal agenda has driven the consistent decrease in government funding of operating costs, with a concomitant expectation that colleges will adopt entrepreneurial approaches to generating alternative revenue sources. To illustrate the ways in which neoliberal forces play out in specific contexts, we draw from Dobbins, Knill and Vögtle's (2011) comprehensive classification of higher education systems. Integrating the literature on internal university governance as well as analyses of the nature of the state's involvement in higher education, their classification system offers a detailed set of policy indicators that can be used to determine "to what extent the HE systems of several countries have become 'marketized'" (p. 667). The classification system is composed of a number of indicators, including internal and external governance structures of the university, strategies for regulating and evaluating quality, relations to the state and society, and funding mechanisms. The most salient indicators for this study describe the system's funding mechanisms and the division of authority among state, market, and academia in controlling and evaluating higher education. In each category of indicators, Dobbins et al. build on Clark's (1983) triad of state, market, and academia, differentiating among three ideal types of governance: state-centered model, market-oriented model, and academic self-rule.

As an ideal type, the state-centered model is distinguished by its oversight by a government ministry and a major funding base from the state. State funding is allocated according to state-defined priorities, and the combination of ministry oversight and government funding strategies results in a postsecondary system that accomplishes the state's socio-economic goals more directly than either other ideal type. The market-oriented model is subject to oversight by quasi-governmental accreditation bodies and financed through diverse funding sources--including tuition, donations, grants, private entities, and the state--largely through

competitive mechanisms. The result is an orientation towards market demands, positioning higher education institutions as actors competing for resources and students. Finally, academic self-governance entails a high level of autonomy within academic departments, along with the power to resist government initiatives. While funded by the state, the high level of professorial autonomy in allocating funds combined with strong protection of academic freedom means that faculty members are relatively free to pursue scholarly agendas separate from the state's interests and, in contrast to the other two models, little desire exists for strong connections between higher education institutions and the state.

To assist researchers in applying this heuristic, Dobbins et al. (2011) assembled a set of empirical indicators for identifying “tangible differences with respect to the degree and scope of autonomy granted to institutions and the nature of governance” (Dobbins et al., 2011, p. 673). Therefore, the framework offers a means of comparing the effects of neoliberal reform across postsecondary systems with different governance and policymaking histories. From Dobbins et al.'s comprehensive set of indices for university systems, we focus on the measures that are particularly salient to our comparison of the governance and policy contexts of community colleges in the US and Canada. Specifically, our analysis emphasizes the following indicators regarding the state's role in regulating postsecondary education: (a) types of organizational bodies that control and evaluate the community colleges, (b) the role that postsecondary funding mechanisms play in these patterns of government oversight and evaluation, and (c) the control instruments that the state uses to direct colleges' programming towards industry needs. Because government control of postsecondary education is decentralized in both countries, our analysis focuses on regulation at the state level for ACC and the provincial level for CC. We use this framework to explain how these funding and control mechanisms are integrally linked to the

neoliberal processes affecting each college, and the consequences for each college's capacity to respond to the needs of student-parents.

Methods

Data come from a qualitative, comparative case study of two large, urban-serving community colleges, one located in New York and the other in British Columbia. Comparative case studies involve the collection and comparison of data across two or more sites (Yin, 2014), and are frequently defined by a "bounded system," in which the object of inquiry has clearly defined boundaries. In this study, each community college serves as the case and focal point for our investigation of organization-level practices as they are shaped by local, regional, and national contexts. Based on our shared methodological commitment to a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), we sought to understand multiple participants' perspectives on the resources available to student-parents. We took an exploratory approach to the study and, as we detail later, came to see the ways in which our data illustrated neoliberalism and later adopted the Dobbins et al. (2011) framework to structure our analysis.

Site Selection

The initial selection of sites was informed by our goal of comparing two community colleges that are subject to comparable neoliberal policymaking pressures. Based on Esping-Andersen's (1990) categorization of different forms of welfare capitalism, both the US and Canada represent "archetypical" examples of the liberal welfare state (p. 27). Although Canada's welfare state regime scores higher on certain social democracy indices in Esping-Andersen's framework, social policies in both countries enforce a similar set of relations among state, market, and family, whereby citizens are only minimally able to maintain an adequate livelihood apart from the market. Additionally, since the 2001 provincial election, British

Columbia's government has been "enthusiastic" in its implementation of neoliberal labor and social policies (McBride & McNutt, 2007, p. 179). The result, according to McBride and McNutt, has been convergence at the provincial level "towards the neoliberal model in general, and aspects of the US social policy model in particular" (p. 179).

Indeed, across our two sites, postsecondary funding patterns at the national and regional levels illustrate analogous neoliberal policymaking trends. In Canada, federal funding for postsecondary education decreased dramatically in the early 1990s, when the government slashed allocations to social programs—including funding to provinces for postsecondary education, health care, housing, and social assistance. As a result of those cuts, federal monies funneled to the provinces for postsecondary education decreased from .41 % of the GDP in 1993 to .2% in 2013. In contrast to the early 1990s, when public funding (provincial and federal combined) of postsecondary operating budgets was at 84%, two decades later, the rate shrank to 57%. Colleges and universities' reliance on tuition and student fees resulted in a change over the same period from 14% to over 34%. Tuition now accounts for an average of 22% of Canadian community colleges' revenue; in the province of British Columbia, it accounts for over 27% (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2015). Political concern over rising tuition in British Columbia led the provincial government to institute a cap of 2% increases in tuition per year, and has enforced the policy across its public postsecondary system since 2005.

A comparable trend in public funding for US higher education is evidenced by the shift in allocations since the early 1990s. Reliance on tuition and student fees to pay for public higher education increased from slightly under 25% in 1992 to over 47% by 2013 (SHEEO, 2015). In New York, where the legislated funding formula distributes financial responsibility for its community colleges across the state government (1/3), the local government (4/15), and students

(1/3), shrinking government contributions—particularly at the local level—have forced colleges to compensate by shifting a greater burden onto students. Increases in tuition since the early 1990s have, at times, been quite steep, making tuition at community colleges in New York State among highest in the country (College Board, 2014). Meanwhile, political concern over rising tuition led the state in 2011 to legislate limits on tuition increases across its public universities over the subsequent five-year period. Unlike the tuition cap in BC, this policy does not include the state's community colleges.

Canadian College. Canadian College (CC) is located in a metropolitan region of British Columbia. Over 2013-2014, CC's annual FTE numbers totaled 7,888, with an unduplicated headcount of approximately 22,000 per year. CC offers over 120 certificates and diplomas in programs lasting anywhere from 5 weeks to two years. The college is the largest postsecondary provider in the metropolitan area of pre-college coursework for adults without the necessary skills or pre-requisites to begin their intended postsecondary program (adult upgrading) as well as English as a Second Language (ESL) programming. Although the college does not collect statistics about the visible minorities that it serves, college personnel consistently noted the significant numbers of racial/ethnic minorities who attend the college. Similarly, the college's report of its student profile acknowledges the linguistic diversity of its students: "CC students come from more than 40 countries and speak more than 30 different languages." CC serves the largest number of Aboriginal students in the metropolitan area—at more than double the proportion of Aboriginals living in the area. Annual tuition for full-time students in academic arts programs in 2014 was \$2,477, one of the lowest tuition prices across the province's public postsecondary system. The college has a childcare center at one of its two campus locations, and travel across the two locations is convenient and fast by using public transit.

American Community College. American Community College (ACC), located in a metropolitan region in New York, enrolls nearly 14,000 students across three campuses, and offers over 90 certificate and degree programs. Over 2013-2014, ACC's FTE numbers totaled 12,151. Students across the three-campus college are predominantly White, while the urban branch, located in the city center, serves a more racially/ethnically diverse student population: during Spring 2014 at Urban Branch, the student population was 35% African American, nearly 10% Latino, and 38% White. Sixty-two percent of first-time college students receive Pell Grants, indicating that ACC serves a high proportion of financially disadvantaged students. Annual tuition for full-time students in 2014 was \$4,295, representing an increase of nearly \$300 since 2012, and \$1,300 since 2007. All three campuses boast childcare centers and a free shuttle service provides transport to students across campus locations.

Participants

Interviews with community college administrators occurred between Spring 2014 and Spring 2015. We recruited 19 community college administrators who work in offices that serve student-parents, in their roles as either students or parents. The US-based researcher interviewed ten administrators, including directors of the childcare campus center and the Pregnancy and Parenting Assistance Fund at ACC as well as administrators in financial aid, admissions, and the Educational Opportunity Program. The Canada-based researcher interviewed nine college personnel, including the director of the daycare center at CC as well as administrators who work in student services, financial aid, enrollment services, Aboriginal student services, and the students' union.

Data Collection

We draw from our interviews with college personnel and documentation gathered from each site. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews with administrators lasted anywhere from 30 to 75 minutes, depending on participants' enthusiasm and relevant information to share. Questions probed the types of services that the office provided, the degree to which administrators believe that the college takes the needs of student-parents into account, and ways that the college might be more effective in serving student-parents. The majority of interviews occurred in participants' offices, though two interviews were completed over the phone for participants unable to meet in person. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Document analysis incorporated information provided on campus websites, college policy documents, and online documentation of state and national policies available for student-parents. Additionally, we collected brochures containing information about various programs during site visits. We also used college, state or provincial, and national datasets on tuition policies and other information related to the cost of attending college.

Data Analysis

In the first phase of analysis, we examined the data with a focus on resources, policies, and practices mentioned by participants that served to support or limit student-parents' postsecondary access and success. We then realized how powerfully the contrasts in our interview data illustrate the varying effects of neoliberalism on the operations of the two colleges, and the significance of this broader context in shaping college-level practices. After reading broadly in the higher education literature, we came to the Dobbins et al. (2011) framework, which informed our second phase of analysis. In this phase, we undertook a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Weiss, 1995) of the interviews using such codes as revenue sources, postsecondary competitors, and managing scarce resources. We also

accomplished detailed within-case analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the interviews, policy documentation and other relevant secondary data in order to describe each case with the governance, funding and institutional autonomy indicators from Dobbins et al.'s framework. These analyses enabled us to understand how each college's position relative to the state and to the market has shaped its operations, and its ability to support student-parents.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, we engaged in method triangulation, collecting data via interviews and document analysis, as well as investigator triangulation, given that there were two researchers collecting data (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). We also engaged in peer debriefing, checking our analyses and interpretations throughout the study with colleagues in each country.

Limitations

Although both colleges serve students across comparable geographical regions, CC maintains two campuses that are located close to each other (and to the city's center). The two campuses share senior administrators and student services personnel. In contrast, ACC's three branches are spread across its service area and staff members tend to work at only one of the campuses. As a result, we are not certain how to explain differences in conversations with administrators across the two sites. While college personnel at CC consistently discussed aspects of the broader postsecondary policy-making environment, this was not true for participants at ACC. Ultimately, this difference may be due to the differing organizational structures; however, it may also reflect a difference in the extent to which state-centered policymaking penetrates the everyday operations of CC, in contrast to the relative autonomy enjoyed by administrators at ACC.

A final limitation is the absence of students' perspectives. Although this analysis illuminates important aspects of the two colleges' operations and capacity to serve students, the perspectives and experiences of student-parents are essential to understanding the extent to which each of these colleges succeeds in meeting students' needs. Despite its importance, it is beyond the scope of this current analytical project.

Findings

CC reflects more elements of a state-centered model than does ACC, which operates largely within a market-oriented postsecondary system. Each college's location has consequences for its ability to serve the needs of student-parents and other nontraditional students. In the profiles that follow, we describe the ways in which each college is broadly situated in national, state/provincial, and local contexts. We focus on governance structures, funding mechanisms, and the role of the state in prioritizing particular workforce needs. We then consider how this broader policy context shapes each college's capacity to pay attention to student-parents.

Canadian College

Oversight and funding. CC is controlled and evaluated by two postsecondary governing bodies, the Ministry of Advanced Education and the Industry Training Authority (ITA), reflecting an approach to postsecondary oversight and evaluation that is more state-centered than market-oriented. Both bodies implement the political platform of the provincial government and together, accomplishing more direct intervention in regulating higher education and enacting a neoliberal curriculum than is evident in a market-based model.

Ministry representatives are appointed by the province's governing party, and the election of a new party into power sweeps a new set of appointees into the province's ministries. A key

election in British Columbia occurred in 2001, at which point the new governing political party implemented a wave of neoliberal reform (McBride & McNutt, 2014). One such neoliberal postsecondary reform was a restructuring, beginning in 2002, of the organizational body overseeing trade and apprenticeship training. The resulting body--the Industry Training Authority--is led by a Board of Directors of nine industry leaders who have been appointed by the provincial government. While the prior supervisory body was overseen by a 25-member board of industry, labor, education and government representatives, the current provincial government's stance is that the ITA's "streamlined, *industry-led system*" (McDonald, 2014, p. 16, emphasis added) is better able to meet the province's workforce needs. This reconfigured governing body plays a critical role in allocating funding and shaping postsecondary education towards meeting industry demands.

Through its approach to postsecondary funding, the provincial government exerts direct influence on CC's occupational programming. In part, this is because the provincial government provides the majority of the college's revenue. During the 2013 fiscal year, 70% of the Canadian College's \$106 million budget was provided through various provincial "grants," including funding through the Industry Training Authority, which provides operating funds to CC for approximately 20% of the college's FTE. Other provincial grants consist of small amounts of money known as "transfers" funneled to the province from the federal government. These transfers include funds for targeted programs such as a settlement program aimed at new immigrants as well as labor market agreements, which direct funding subsidies to employers who sponsor skills training.

The majority of provincial funding comes from an FTE-based core operating grant, which is subject to cuts if CC fails to meet its allotted number of "seats" for domestic students,

but does not increase if domestic student enrollment exceeds the target. Thus, exceeding the domestic student FTE target would not increase the college's operating grant, and would also increase costs to the college that the additional student tuition would not cover. Through these policies, domestic student enrollment is controlled by the provincial government in ways that may not align with postsecondary student demand. This creates the potential for conflict between adhering to the state's vision of postsecondary education and meeting prospective students' needs and preferences

Through its postsecondary funding mechanisms, the government of British Columbia guides postsecondary providers towards the province's specific economic and workforce education priorities. BC's current postsecondary funding priorities are outlined in the government's 2014 "Skills for Jobs Blueprint," which identifies the top "in-demand" jobs forecasted for 2018. The blueprint notes the government's plan to "align \$270 million in postsecondary funding towards in-demand jobs; and \$6.6 million for critical trades seats throughout BC," with particular focus on the top 10 jobs forecasted across the province's liquefied natural gas (LNG) industry. The "alignment" of funding has not entailed any increases in postsecondary funding; it has merely restricted postsecondary providers' uses of existing funding streams. For instance, all public postsecondary institutions in BC must allocate a minimum of 25% of their provincial operating grants by 2017-2018 towards the most in-demand occupations as determined by the provincial government (e.g. health care, technology and LNG-related career training).

Well disciplined by the neoliberal curriculum, CC prides itself on its efficient use of public funds. Participants consistently reiterated the high level of operating efficiency of the college. Salaries and benefits for employees categorized as instruction and instructional support

account for 72% of the college's expenses. Although the collective agreements of the faculty and staff unions require consistent annual increases in spending, there is currently a freeze on compensation increases for administrators.

Still, the institution seeks additional operational efficiencies; recently a consultant was brought in to identify possible solutions. As one participant recounted, the consultant recommended creating large lecture courses, along the model of many first-year university courses, "where you could have 100 people, and anything above 29 students is all profit." CC rejected this suggestion. The college prides itself on offering postsecondary access to nontraditional students, including older students, those seeking short-term and part-time career training, adult immigrants, and those unready for and/or uninterested in university transfer. CC's programs are designed to support a high-quality learning experience for smaller cohorts of students; additionally, in many of its career programs, class sizes are limited by the profession's regulatory agencies. In the meantime, CC has touted its attention to seemingly minor cost-savings measures, such as no longer accepting credit cards for tuition payments from domestic students, thus eliminating the small financial loss that the institution incurred for each credit card transaction. Such efficiencies, however, have not boosted the college's capacity to compete for additional resources in the larger postsecondary marketplace.

Capacity to support student-parents. CC finds itself relatively disadvantaged in the competition for resources within its postsecondary organizational field. Certainly, balancing budgets has been challenging for postsecondary institutions across the province. As one respondent summed up, "there's been a continuous squeeze on the part of government." CC is especially challenged in its ability to compete for profitable students and its capacity to expand programming in high-demand occupations. These challenges, and CC's responses to provincial

policymaking, have focused the college's attention towards ensuring a basic level of postsecondary access for students who are increasingly marginalized by the province's agenda for postsecondary education. This approach renders the needs of student-parents beyond the scope of CC's efforts.

Like other postsecondary providers in the province, CC has looked to expand student enrollments in areas not subject to the tuition policy, including international students, third-party contracts, new programming, and continuing education. The tuition and fees for international students, for example, is over 250% of the prices for domestic students, and international student enrollment is not subject to restrictions from the provincial government. Additionally, new programs can be initiated at higher tuition levels, and CC has recently developed a new degree program in hospitality management to capitalize on the opportunity to set the tuition itself.

However, other colleges in the area have been far more successful in expanding these more profitable enrollment areas, particularly in attracting international students, and expanding revenue-generating continuing education offerings. In the meantime, CC has renewed its commitment to offering postsecondary access through its large proportion of developmental programs. This commitment, multiple respondents reported, further compromises the college's ability to compete for international students. In one participant's words,

Everybody else wants to ... look like a university so that a student from Hong Kong or Taipei or Beijing will ... go there and bottom lines will be strengthened as a result. The last remaining genuine community college in the province is probably [Canadian College].

By enrolling a large proportion of students in Adult Basic Education, Adult Upgrading (Grade 10-12 coursework), and ESL programs, CC's primary focus is not university-transfer

coursework. Moreover, serving these students, many of them adult immigrants, has caused additional funding instability for CC over the past year, as government funding “clawbacks” have introduced fees for these formerly tuition-free programs. As one participant shared: “Even when we’re faced with financial hardships, ... the provincial government wants to see the programs continue, but it’s not going to fund them.” Enrollments in these program areas have decreased sharply, leading the college to lay off instructors. Additionally, CC’s commitment to its college access programs further limits its already low capacity to develop high revenue-producing industry partnerships—a hallmark of success for the region’s highly regarded polytechnic institute. Ultimately, Canadian College finds itself on the losing end of two critical revenue-generating options for postsecondary providers: attracting high tuition-paying international students and capitalizing on the province’s workforce development priorities.

As an under-resourced college operating in an environment that emphasizes the need to produce workers for the provincial government’s economic goals, CC’s capacity to respond to the needs of student-parents is highly circumscribed. Aside from the childcare center, the college does not direct any additional resources to student-parents. The absence of targeted supports is embedded in the province’s approach to financial aid as well as in the organization of student services inside the college.

At the provincial level, accessibility to community colleges for low-income students or student-parents does not appear to be a high priority. To gain access to provincial or federal grants, a student must apply through the province’s student loan program. However, without access to a well-informed advisor, it is not clear whether grants or fellowships are available through the program. In fact, few of the grants that BC offers are need-based. Instead, financial support for low-income students and student-parents is often dependent on the student’s pathway

into high-demand occupations in the province. Two exceptions are the Adult Upgrading Grant, available to low-income students enrolling in the formerly tuition-free ABE and ESL programs, and grants providing \$100 per month to low-income students with dependents under 12 years old.

The access and affordability challenges facing student-parents at Canadian College reflect a broader conflict around educational opportunities for lower income students and unmarried parents as the province increases its reliance on postsecondary education to accomplish its economic and workforce development goals. For instance, single mothers receiving income assistance in BC have been prevented from participating in postsecondary education. A recently announced initiative modified this restriction; the province plans to offer tuition and childcare subsidies for single parents receiving income assistance or disability for a 12-month period, as long as the individual enters a program leading to one of the province's in-demand occupations. This initiative comprises one component of the broader set of policies aimed at accomplishing the government's economic priorities: to build the labor market for the industries in the province that revolve around natural resource exploitation, particularly LNG.

Although CC offers resources that are accessible to students with children, only the childcare center is targeted specifically at student-parents. Open to children of faculty, staff, and the local community, priority enrollment at the college's daycare center is granted to CC students. Part of the college since 1972, the college's daycare center maintains a high reputation for its quality of care as well as its affordability relative to other childcare options in the city. Affordable daycare alternatives are limited across the metropolitan region; even unlicensed family childcare can easily exceed the government childcare subsidy available to low-income parents by over 100%.

However, the spaces at the center are limited. The center can accommodate 12 toddlers and 25 children aged 3-5, and maintains a one- to two-year waiting list. Currently, only half of the spaces are filled by children of CC students, most of whom are enrolled in the ESL program, with remaining spots held by faculty, staff, and former students. Although students' children are offered priority at the childcare center, the government subsidy for low-income students is not available during the summer. Consequently, spaces that open up during summer months typically end up being filled by children of non-students.

In light of one administrator's description of CC as "very bare bones, in many ways," it may not be surprising that college personnel consistently identified the childcare center as the sole support. Other resources, participants explained, are accessible, but not exclusively to student-parents. The students' union, which advocates for resources that make the college accessible and affordable, understands its mission as attending to what will have "the biggest bang for everybody." As a student union representative explained,

Being at the capacity level that we're at, it's hard for us to say something like, "let's allocate 500 hours this year to investigate the daycare situation," ... We have to spend the 500 where we're going to impact the largest number of our members.

In addition to identifying such offices as counseling and disability services, financial aid, Aboriginal student services, the student union, and the college ombudsperson, respondents noted the availability of supports such as the reduced fee public transit pass, counselor referrals to the local food exchange program, access to a pro-bono law clinic to offer legal services, and an emergency fund for Aboriginal students.

The absence of targeted resources is a direct consequence of CC's low capacity as well as its location in a system that is focused on training employees for the province's economic

priorities. For instance, although the college provides supports for students with disabilities and for Aboriginal students, these support services are legally mandated, and as such, are financed through specific funding streams. If the college could access additional federal or provincial funding earmarked for student-parents, it would likely do so. Indeed, since the province reversed its funding policy of ABE and ESL programs, CC has worked hard to inform prospective students and assist current students in acquiring the provincial Adult Upgrading Grant available to low-income students. However, continued government disinvestment in funding the college's core operations causes ongoing challenges for the entire student services division. As one administrator explained, "ultimately you get to a point where things like student services begin to look pretty scant and threadbare. And that's the by-product to [the government's] approach to funding." In sum, CC is at a distinct disadvantage within this postsecondary landscape. The majority of its students are enrolled in pre-college level programs and the college is not well positioned to respond with entrepreneurial strategies to meet the province's economic priorities or to compete for higher-paying students. As a result, CC is able to meet some needs of its nontraditional student body, but its capacity to attend to student-parents is highly limited.

American Community College

Oversight and funding. As a college in the State University of New York (SUNY) system, ACC is regulated by the types of state or quasi-governmental accreditation bodies that Dobbins et al. (2011) have identified as exemplars of the market-oriented model. Within this governance model, ACC enjoys autonomy in much of its decision-making while being accountable to system-level rules and performance guidelines, such as the setting of tuition and program articulation across the system. System-level policymaking occurs under the aegis of the 18-member SUNY Board of Trustees; 15 members are appointed by the governor for 7-year

terms while the remaining three members each represent the Student Assembly, the University Faculty Senate, and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges (SUNY, nd). SUNY itself is overseen by a chancellor and a 17-member New York State Board of Regents. Elected by the legislature for five-year terms, the Board of Regents is primarily responsible for licensing and accrediting programs and institutions. Together, these two bodies set forth criteria that ACC must adhere to in order to keep its funding. The multiple governing authorities and the fact that board member terms outlast the government officials who appoint them suggest that ACC is not as beholden to government and industry intervention as CC.

At ACC, the state's primary control instruments consist of a "performance system" of five outcome indicators and the introduction of a limited amount of performance-based funding for for-credit occupational education. The state's performance system, which is currently not linked to any direct funding or penalties for noncompliance, essentially encourages community colleges to pursue greater numbers of FTEs while monitoring overall persistence and completion rates. The primary incentive for participating in this outcome measurement system is eligibility for the newly implemented Next Generation Jobs Linkages Program, which distributes \$3 million per year among community colleges that have documented successful persistence, program completion, and employment outcomes for students in certain applied associate's degree and certificate programs.

Together, these performance-related mechanisms are aimed at encouraging New York's community colleges to improve student outcomes, but not at dictating its program offerings or controlling enrollment numbers. For example, the newly implemented Next Generation Jobs Linkages Program distributes \$3 million per year among community colleges that have documented successful persistence, program completion, and employment outcomes for students

in certain applied associate's degree and certificate programs. ACC reaped financial rewards through the program; one of only four community colleges (in a state with 30 community colleges) to receive more than \$200,000, ACC was recognized as the highest performing in the state and was awarded \$266,049.

ACC's funding base reflects aspects of a market-oriented approach to postsecondary funding in terms of its diversification. Its three primary sources of funding are the county (approximately 19%), the state (29%), and student tuition and supplemental fees (44%). Over the past decade, as the county and state's contributions have failed to increase in proportion with ACC's operating budget, the college has compensated for declining public monies by relying on tuition increases. ACC's reliance on tuition and student fees for such a large proportion of its revenue stream means that student (consumer) demand plays a significant role in shaping ACC's efforts to expand its student population.

This approach to postsecondary funding has also encouraged ACC to operate efficiently—a key lesson of the neoliberal curriculum. In the context of the shrinking pool of public monies, ACC boasts one of the lowest net operating costs of the system's 30 community colleges. While the average operating costs across all state community colleges was \$9,173 per FTE, ACC's operating costs were just \$7,522 per FTE. ACC notes in its 2012-2013 Institutional Report Card:

This ranking is impressive in that [ACC] is a multi-campus college providing full-time services at all campuses, maintains over 1.3+ million square feet of space, offers 100 degree and certificate programs, is among those with the largest student enrollments and has one of the largest disadvantaged populations in the state.

Like CC, ACC is proud of its low operating costs. However, as some participants pointed out, this operational efficiency also means that many offices are understaffed, or rely primarily on part-time instead of full-time workers. As one staff member said, “we’d love to do more, but with the staffing...we’re running really lean right now...we’re running at max capacity... more staff would allow us to have more opportunities for outreach.” The state might reward ACC for being efficient, but the efficiency seems to come on the backs of overworked staff.

As noted above, competing for resources includes the pursuit of student enrollment across all programming areas. In 2013, after three years of declining enrollments, ACC conducted a market survey, discovering that nearly 1,000 students from its service area had enrolled in other community colleges to pursue degrees in science. To counteract the exodus of students and their tuition dollars, ACC’s board approved construction of a new STEM building on the Suburban Branch campus. In doing so, the college is signaling, both to local technology firms and potential students, that the college is able to educate skilled workers. This plan may also strengthen ACC’s performance on the outcome measures being rewarded by the state.

Capacity to support student-parents. While CC has struggled in the competition for postsecondary resources, ACC has found ways to acquire resources within a system that encourages market-based behaviors with considerably less directive state intervention. As a result of its position in the marketplace, the college is able to target resources to all students, including student-parents. Additionally, ACC has acquired grant-based funds that are meant to be used solely by students with children

The availability of need-based financial aid that is not linked to the state’s economic and workforce priorities offers another significant contrast between ACC and CC. Low-income students at ACC, including student-parents, do not pay much (if anything) for their education.

The majority of ACC students qualify for federal Pell grants (with a maximum of \$5730) along with the state's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), which awards up to \$5165 toward tuition and fees. Additional grants are also available, including the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and small grants for participants in the Educational Opportunity Program. The city also recently founded a "Say Yes to Education" program, which makes funds available to city residents to use toward their education. Thus, students who qualify for maximum aid receive money to cover nearly all of the cost of attendance, regardless of their program's alignment with regional industry priorities.

Accordingly, ACC's capacity to target resources at student-parents is much less circumscribed than CC's. In the case of childcare, ACC serves far more students than CC, and students do not have to wait for years to qualify for a spot. The childcare center at Urban Branch, for instance, is licensed to serve up to 68 children per day, though it typically averages about 35 to 40 children per day. Children as young as 6 weeks are accepted and children can stay until the age of 5. Children of faculty and staff are not eligible, leaving all spots for student-parents. Students, however, can only use the center on days they attend class, and must pick their kids up within 30 minutes after their last class.

Childcare is available at a significantly reduced cost to nearly all student-parents, due to three different sources of funds: a federal block grant, a federally subsidized CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in School) grant for Urban Branch, and a grant through the student government. ACC is only one of three colleges in the state that receives the CCAMPIS, and the college has consistently reapplied for and received this grant every four years for the past two decades. Together, the CCAMPIS subsidy and the federal block grant enable ACC to provide childcare to eligible students for \$60 per month. Further contributing to its ability to support

student-parents, in Fall 2014, ACC received a \$500,000, four-year grant from the NY Department of Health to establish the Parenting and Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PPAF), which provides services for pregnant and parenting students. Allocated from a \$1.34 million grant that the NY Department of Health was awarded through the Affordable Care Act, ACC's grant is part of the state's goal of targeting the three regions in the state with the highest rates of youth pregnancy.

Staff at PPAF support students and direct them to resources, both on- and off-campus. For example, the coordinator explained how she helped one pregnant student who had been approved for a Section 8 voucher and needed to find a new place to live. In the program's first year, it served 100 students by providing information and referrals and, in some cases, small financial awards of less than \$100. The office has also occasionally paid the weekly childcare center fee for some students who are in dire need.

At the same time, PPAF faces organizational challenges. In its first year, the program had three different coordinators, each with different agendas and foci. The sustainability of the program beyond the grant is also of concern. The coordinators have developed memoranda of understanding with external agencies, such as the local Urban League and a community healthcare center, but whether five years is enough time to build a sustainable set of services is unclear. As a previous coordinator explained, "we have to use our community partners because we're not gonna be able to afford to support this program after that." Connecting student-parents to existing resources has proven challenging, both in terms of tapping into external resources and publicizing the program's existence. As the program coordinator acknowledged, few students on campus know of the office's existence, limiting the extent to which the program can assist its intended audience.

In sum, in addition to federal and state grants that cover the cost of attendance, student-parents have access to low-cost childcare and support from the PPAF. These targeted resources owe their existence to the combination of state-sponsored funding opportunities and ACC's grant-writing success. Continued provision of these resources depends, in part, on ACC's ability to outperform its competitors. Ultimately, in the competition for resources, the availability of resources matters. Continuing cuts to the federal block grants that help fund the childcare center, as well as the end of the PPAF funding period indicate the need for ACC to find new external resources and deploy them in creative (and efficient) ways.

Discussion

Our data illustrate the contrasting effects of neoliberalism on the operations of two community colleges. While both colleges are subject to neoliberal pressures, essential differences in each college's regulatory and policy environment have shaped how neoliberalism has affected each college's organization-level practices, underscoring past research that suggests that local context shapes the ways in which neoliberalism plays out (Ball, 2012; Brenner & Theodore, 2002). In turn, these differences have significant implications for each college's capacity to direct its attention towards students with children.

Dobbins et al.'s (2011) heuristic for identifying an institution's autonomy relative to state and market helps illuminate these essential differences. Reflecting more elements of a state-centered model than a market-oriented model, CC operates more directly as a tool of the government's socio-economic goals. As Harvey (2007b) points out, the socioeconomic goals of the neoliberal state do not necessarily have the best interests of its citizens in mind, but rather are focused on meeting the needs of the economy. Consequently, the current provincial government's fiercely neoliberal agenda has been translated, through direct funding mandates,

into specifically targeted career-technical education programming across BC's postsecondary system. Not only has such neoliberal policymaking positioned CC students primarily as future workers, but it has also reified the ideal student as someone whose caregiving responsibilities are a private and individual matter. Situated within a system that is more state-centered than market-oriented, CC is subject to more operating restrictions than ACC while simultaneously limited in its ability to compete within its organizational field.

By maintaining its role as what one administrator described as one of the last "genuine" community colleges in the region, CC has, paradoxically, increased some students' postsecondary opportunities, while simultaneously constraining CC's capacity to accommodate the range of students it would like to serve. By trying to maintain its commitment to ABE and ESL students in the face of the government's disinvestment in such programs, CC has pursued programming for students who are not ready for the career training options that the government currently favors. By reaffirming its dedication to the large immigrant population in its service area and to students who need additional academic preparation in order to enroll in college-level coursework, CC is devoting resources to support marginalized students—and in a sense, resisting the government's neoliberal agenda. There are few financial rewards for doing so, and CC is operating at a low level of capacity. In turn, CC's capacity to consider the needs of its student-parents is limited. The invisibility of student-parents across CC's organizational policies is evident in the consistent refrain among college personnel: the on-campus childcare center, the only resource aimed at supporting student-parents, is unable to meet the urgent demand of its student-parent population.

In contrast, ACC's location in a market-oriented system means that ACC is buffered from the kind of direct state intervention that CC experiences. Within this more market-oriented

system, ACC students are positioned as potential workers, but also as educational consumers whose preferences and needs require attention. ACC's plan to construct the new STEM building illustrates this dual commitment; the college hopes to curtail the exodus of students leaving its service area, while also recognizing the need to produce workers for local industries. This market-oriented system encourages colleges to produce future workers to meet the needs of the local workforce, but workforce needs and priorities are determined by business and not the government. This example illustrates the ways in which neoliberalism operates within the local context, by underscoring the market-based behaviors that ACC must adopt in order to accrue more resources—in this case, students. At the same time, ACC's funding mechanisms do not privilege the enrollment of particular subgroups of students. While ACC may be competing for higher status students, those students do not bring the immediate advantage of increased tuition dollars in the same way that international student enrollment does in BC. Indeed, nearly any boost in FTEs could prove financially beneficial. This financial motivation to appeal to as many different students as possible, combined with incentives to engage in entrepreneurial behavior have set the stage for ACC to garner resources that benefit student-parents.

Within their respective postsecondary fields, entrepreneurial behavior accomplishes different goals and benefits different students. Colleges in BC are focused on increasing international student enrollment; developing high-tuition, niche, continuing education programs; and creating industry partnerships in order to capitalize on the provincial government's skills training agenda, particularly in jobs related to the LNG industry. CC finds itself less able than its competitors to accomplish these goals, further limiting its capacity to attend to students already marginalized by the province's single-minded focus on its workforce planning goals.

Unlike CC, ACC has capitalized on funding streams that increase its capacity to attract a range of consumers, including full tuition-paying students, students across a wide range of occupational and academic programs, and students with children. Operating within a more market-based model, ACC is encouraged to meet a range of consumer demands. Due to its success in this system, relative to its competitors, ACC has been able to—at least temporarily—offer additional support to student-parents. In addition to providing low-cost childcare through federal and state grants, ACC received a grant from New York State to start the PPAF.

At ACC, neoliberal pressures have been tempered by relative autonomy from direct political intervention. Although some government grants have been subject to cuts, and other state funds are distributed as a reward for top performers, both hallmarks of neoliberal policymaking in a market-oriented system, ACC still benefits from programs and policies intended to address social inequalities. For example, the PPAF grant originated with the Affordable Care Act. Additionally, the Pell Grant and the New York State TAP, both established during the 1970s, provide critical financial assistance to low-income students. Thus, although more recent public policy has veered toward merit- rather than need-based aid, these established federal and state policies offer a counterbalance. Depending on future shifts in the broader policy environment, ACC may have difficulty continuing to attend to the needs of low-income and otherwise marginalized students, regardless of its current success in its organizational field.

In contrast, CC operates within a more state-centered model, in which the provincial government directs its postsecondary system to accomplish the governing political party's educational agenda. Thus, the current neoliberal provincial government is able to make use of direct funding and oversight mechanisms in order to focus attention on training skilled workers

in targeted fields. Satisfying these mandates and competing for available resources in this policy environment circumscribes CC's capacity and attention to student needs. In the case of student-parents, the college offers limited childcare and no other resources targeted at student-parents. While various administrators acknowledged this dearth of organization-wide support for students with children, they suggested that CC is already stretched beyond its capacity in its efforts to offer postsecondary access to students not favored by the provinces' funding and oversight mechanisms.

Conclusion

This cross-country comparison highlights the importance of the local postsecondary policy context in shaping each college's organization-level responses to neoliberalism. CC's position within a more state-centered postsecondary system has resulted in more direct state intervention as well as focused neoliberal control over its enrollment, spending, and revenue. ACC's contrasting location in a market-based system has buffered it from direct state control and granted it more latitude in responding to students as consumers with diverse preferences and needs. Within their respective postsecondary fields, CC's resistance to the government's neoliberal agenda and its relative disadvantage vis-à-vis its competitors have compromised its capacity to serve its student-parent population. In contrast, ACC has found ways to benefit from its policy context, and has increased its capacity, at least temporarily, to address the needs of its student-parents.

At this level of analysis, the extent and nature of student-parents' access to and use of college-going supports across these two sites is not entirely clear. However, our data do suggest that a range of student-parent needs is more visible at ACC's Urban Branch than at CC. The PPAF has afforded ACC the opportunity to build a network of supports with a single entry point

for student-parents. In contrast, college personnel at CC seemed resigned to the fact that the college is currently unable to respond effectively to student-parents. Although the scarcity of affordable childcare was mentioned frequently, administrators were unable to articulate any other student-parent concerns. Nor does the college have the capacity to target resources to this particular subgroup of students.

The increasing disinvestment in publicly-funded postsecondary education in both the US and Canada presents significant challenges to community colleges as they attempt to serve the most disadvantaged and marginalized students across the two countries' systems of higher education. Students with caregiving responsibilities may be particularly vulnerable to neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility and market-based exchanges. Our hope is that policymakers in both countries will temper their embrace of market-based values and commit to a vision of postsecondary education that also serves more equitable, egalitarian goals for the public good.

In the meantime, there is potential at both colleges to better illuminate the specific challenges faced by their local student-parent populations. The PPAF at ACC and the students' union at CC are both locations that serve as a resource hub, where coordinators respond to a wide range of student concerns. These are both offices that can document student-parents' concerns in a more systematic manner, solicit feedback about how to better communicate with and support student-parents, and ultimately make visible the needs of student-parents on each campus. This visibility of student-parents' needs may be the first step towards finding low-cost solutions, expanding the capacity of each college's key resource hubs, and developing more political will to support postsecondary education for the most marginalized.

This initial exploration of colleges' approaches to supporting student-parents suggests the need for further investigation, including student-parents' experiences inside these community colleges and how the obstacles facing this subset of students illuminates the broader set of challenges involved in improving authentic postsecondary opportunity for nontraditional students. U.S.-based researchers might compare the experiences of students across states that vary in their reliance on performance-based accountability. Likewise, Canada-based researchers could examine the effect of different provincial tuition policies on student-parent postsecondary access. Cross-border comparisons may prove particularly generative in understanding the interplay within different welfare state regimes among neoliberalism, postsecondary policymaking, and postsecondary access. Ultimately, however, we fear that additional research will continue to reveal how policies and practices run up against the embrace of the market, fostering conditions which disadvantage the already marginalized.

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